10: d'Orleans--258 T-3 (1891-92) 1894 Laos
116, 131, 342, 361, 485

"Although the region called Laos has not, properly speaking, any clearly defined frontiers, we may consider that we have crossed the eastern boundary between Dien Bien and Sop Nao. Here the country changes, and we appear to enter a more civilised world; the houses are still based upon piles, but they are better built than those of the Thaïs, and they are arranged in regular lines on each side of a street; at the entrance an empty hostelry is ready for travellers."

25: Brodrick--108-109 S-3 (1939) 1948 Laotians
116, 361, 485

"Vientiane strings along the left bank of the Mekong and it faces almost due south over the expanse of eastern Siam's great bulge. Vientiane is quite a large place and has grown from 1900, when it was refounded, into a town of over 10,000 inhabitants, with a Government-owned bungalow and two rather modest hotels. In the Upper Laos, as a rule, there are no hotels at all, you either camp [109] out or put up in a sala where you can get eggs, chickens, rice and fuel very cheap. In the olden days, at least, before the last war, you could get by in the Laos very comfortably for ten shillings a day."

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

CHAPTER XVII

LAOS

LAOS from 10,000 feet was a grey-green frothing seen through a heat-mist that was like a pane of dirty glass. As we came into Vientiane in the late afternoon the mist thickened and the pilot came down as if to look for landmarks. For the last half-hour bundles of rags kept whirling past the cabin. They were vultures — bad things to hit at two hundred miles an hour. We landed bumpily in a haze, as though bonfires had been lit round the field; and in this the sun wallowed — a diffused yellow disc. As the door of the cabin was opened, the heat rolled in.

In most journeyings there stands out the memory of days of discouragement; when the enthusiasm flags under the strain of petty physical discomforts. The introduction to Laos was spent in such a period. This was the earthly paradise that all the French had promised; the country that was one vast Tahiti, causing all the French who had been stationed there to affect ever after a vaguely dissolute manner. To be fair to Laos I was seeing it at the worst of all possible seasons — it was late March — when the air is burdened with the presage of storms and the landscape blighted with autumnal sadness. Heat lay like an interdict on the town of Vientiane, although the sun was wrapped until late morning in a sweltering mist. At certain hours, out of the stillness, a hot wind rose suddenly and skirmished in the streets, producing a brief, false animation, flapping huge leaves in the faces of passers-by, who were half disembodied by the swirling dust, above which they floated like genii. Sometimes the grey, swollen sky squeezed out a few drops of rain.

I was lodged in the government guest-house, a European villa — since it had two storeys — which at some time had gone native, with earthenware dragons crawling on its roof. Hornets had

69: Lewis T-5 (1950) 1951 AM 1 Indochina
Laotians AM 8

started cellular constructions in the window shutters and armies of cockroaches marched across the floors. Precious, expensive water was brought in large pots and left in the subdivision of the room where, using a gourd with a hole in its bottom, you could take a shower. The main advantage of having this open pot of water in the room was that it collected a gauzy layer of mosquitoes which were content to stay there in harmless concentration, unless disturbed. The Mekong could be seen from the window, a sallow strip of water across half a mile of whitened river-bed. Perhaps this drought had something to do with the town's electrical generating system, because only occasionally – and never at night – would the filament of the electric light bulb consent to glow feebly. Whenever the hot wind sprang up, stirring the trees round the house, great dry leaves as big as dishes came tumbling down and fell with a crash in the layer already deposited on the earth. It was the death-rattle of the year, which in Laos expires in croaking senility, to be re-born with the raging storms which were about to break.

Vientiane is a religious centre, one of the two ancient capitals of Laos. It abounds with pagodas, many of them deserted and in ruins; and colossal Buddhas, with dusty half-obliterated smiles, sit in the tumbled brickwork.

Since at this time, when the earth had dried up, there was no work to be done anywhere, it was the season of *bouns*; the Laotian festivals. Each pagoda holds one, as a means of collecting funds. They last for three days, and although an attempt is made not to hold two *bouns* at the same time, there are so many pagodas that duplication cannot always be helped; so that every night for several weeks the sky over one or more districts of Vientiane glows with the reflection of thousands of lights, while from a distance one catches the gusty, carnival sounds of Laotian rejoicings. *Bouns* start at about eleven, and go on all night.

The first night after my arrival I went to a *boun*, which I found by

[late March. -- Analyst]

149: Reinach--124 G-S (no date) 1901 AM1 Indochina
Laotians AM8

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Although less pure than in Cambodia, the bonzes' morals in Laos are generally fairly good. They are, moreover, greatly loved, highly regarded and fondly cherished. When there is a celebration or a great feast in a family, part of the choicest dishes is always reserved for the bonzes.

On the next to the last day of every phase of the moon, the bonzes must make public confession of their faults and be prepared, should the need arise, to undergo the punishments which the code stipulates.

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Bonzeries are schools and at the same time workshops where all trades are taught. All knowledge is concentrated in them, as our knowledge was during the Middle Ages in monasteries.

Together with the pagodas, they are also spots of inviolable asylum in accordance with certain rights, and hostelries where travelers are lodged and fed with the produce of the bonzes' alms-seeking.

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Newly ordained bonzes must stay in the pagoda at least three months, and may quit their habit at the end of this period. If a bonze desires to return to the pagoda after he has reentered lay life, his reassumption of the habit gives rise to the same formalities and ceremonies as the first time. It is a new ordination.

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The liturgical litanies of the Buddhist religion, which the bonzes psalmodize, may not be translated into Laotian. The bonzes and the [165] [Illustration] [166] [Blank page] [167] Laotian faithful, as well as the cantors and the French adepts, chant prayers whose meaning they do not understand (1).

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(1) In reality the Laotian, Lu and Youn bonzes form a sort of caste as the Druids used to in Gaul. More particularly, they are the ministers of worship, the repositories of moral authority, of scientific traditions, of secrets and of artistic and industrial methods. They transmit by word of mouth the precepts of Buddhist dogma, which were long ago explained by those who introduced the religion into the land. But the writings in "Pali" which contained these, although they can still be read mechanically by a few scholars, are no longer understood. Thence arises the necessity of handing down their meaning by word alone. Thence also, without doubt, arises the increasingly greater attenuation of the purity and force of these principles as they

346 Pagodas are always built on ground which has been perfectly leveled, is quite extensive and is surrounded by a wooden palisade or brick wall of elbow height.

[485] Within the pagoda enclosures there are bonzeries and dependent structures to serve as quarters for the bonzes, schools for their pupils and hostelries for travelers.

735 The construction and upkeep of pagodas are entirely dependent on the generous liberality of the faithful. Thus these edifices can be used 346 as a criterion for discovering both the state of prosperity of a region and the religious faith of its inhabitants.

[778] As used to be the case for our churches, Laotian pagodas and even their enclosures are, according to the customs of the land, sanctuaries which confer immunity against legal prosecution for certain crimes and misdemeanors.

[527] It is also in the enclosure and sometimes under the cloisters and verandas of the pagodas that the inhabitants gather on the legal holidays, and also private holidays, which are known as "Ngans".

844 Childbirth. Dr. Estrade describes the delivery of a woman of southern Laos as follows. The preliminaries, the operation itself and post-delivery procedure are the same, with only slight differences in detail, in northern Laos, and we may therefore quote Dr. Estrade's description as applicable to all of Laos in general.

"Childbirth never takes place in the house inhabited by the pregnant woman or her direct relatives, but always in the home of a neighbor or distant relative who gives hospitality to the patient until she is up and about again. The duration of pregnancy is counted in moons, as in all calculations of time, the moon being the essential element for the Laotian in the measurement of time and the occurrence 777 of a great many phenomena. When a woman reaches the last moon of her pregnancy she takes certain precautions all tending to delay 821 delivery until the first phase of the new moon, since births during the last phases are signs of misfortune [189] such as the death of the child, [782] deformity, etc. These prejudices have such force that parents are careless in caring for any child born during the last phases of the moon, and in such a case all of their effort goes into prayers, offerings to the bonzes and the making of votive offerings (1)

(1) This assertion should not, however, be taken too literally or in any general sense. This is a prejudice which is kept up by the bonzes in their own self-interest, and is easy to see through. (Author's note.)

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Polygamy. Although polygamy is not the rule in Laos, it is sanctioned by custom, and the only limits as to the number of wives one man may possess are the extent of his resources and his personal taste for becoming the husband of a greater or lesser number of wives.

Since infertile unions are regarded as a punishment of [194] heaven, and since physiological defects are beyond the comprehension of the Laotians, a husband who has no children has two courses between which he can choose:

1. To repudiate his sterile wife. He must then leave her all [586] their property gains since their marriage and half of their common property;

2. To keep this wife and take a second one.

Recourse is preferably had to the last solution in most cases. By acting thus the husband avoids making restitutions which would often be difficult for him. Moreover, his first wife often persuades him to take a second wife who will be under her orders and almost become her slave.

This is what does happen if the husband has enough money for several wives. They are all under the domination of the first, never sit at the same rank as she and may not wear jewels or clothes which are as rich and sumptuous as hers. They are, in a way, legal concubines.

These secondary wives are ranked in accordance with their date of entry into the polygamous household and are designated as the first wife, second wife, third wife, fourth wife, etc. In the house, except for the times when the husband or master keeps them with him, they are employed as servants for all the household tasks, farming, spinning cotton, weaving cloth, etc.

In the case the first wife should die, and according to the will of the husband, the second wife takes her place and the others advance one notch.

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There is also another very curious type of polygamy which is encouraged by the nomadic habits of the Laotian traveler or trader and which, "utile dulci," yields him profit, security and pleasure. Some natives are, in fact, married at several different places, often quite far from one another and generally situated at the spots where periodic markets are held.

The advantages of this type of polygamy--from the Laotian point of view, of course--are that the husband can have an associate

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595 in each center who will represent him, handle business in his absence,
485 collect at leisure the stock of trading merchandise needed for the next [195] trip, and also provide a home for him where he is sure to find a smiling face and a warm welcome in the course of his wanderings.

554 Among the nobility and the so-called princely families polygamy
595 is the rule and is almost obligatory for the sake of prestige, which demands a greater or lesser number of concubines depending on the husband's rank. It may sometimes happen, for various reasons, that there are two wives whose progeniture enjoy a higher rank and inherit the titles and duties of the father. It also happens, in this social milieu, that the first wife or wives will see that their husband is growing old, worn out and morose, and will seek to distract him during his last years by making him marry quite young girls for whom he is more of a father than a husband but who give him the illusion of rejuvenation and bring joy and gaiety into the house with the light of their youth (1).

(1) Thanks to the docile character of Laotian women in general, and also to the atavistic imprint of custom which makes them regard polygamy as an entirely natural status, peace and harmony are rarely troubled in such households. A hierarchy naturally arises among the various wives and concubines. Each of them remains in the place assigned to her by the date of her entry into the household and enjoys any special favors which may be conferred on her by their common husband without arousing any jealousy.

Quarrels between wives are so rare that when one does by chance occur the corporal punishments decreed by ancient custom are unhesitatingly applied. The situation is of such a nature as to preserve among Laotian wives a spirit of conciliation and amiability which is not the least of their charms.

832 Kissing. Punishment for amatory offenses. Like most of the
834 peoples of the Far East, the Laotians do not indulge in kissing, at least not in the European manner. They rub their noses against the skin of their children or wives and sniff more or less noisily.

Although the morals of the Laotians seem excessively free to us and their remarks, songs and gestures often border on what we would describe as obscenity, we should not conclude that the Laotians are deliberately lewd or cynical. They are instinctively careful to be